

Earthquake Alliance Helps Armenian Families Build New Homes

YEREVAN, Armenia—Thousands of Armenians left homeless by the earthquake of 1988 are moving out of emergency shelters into new homes and apartments under a housing program created by a USAID alliance with NGOs and U.N. agencies.

The massive earthquake of December 1988 took over 25,000 lives, leaving about 500,000 Armenian families homeless and the country's infrastructure badly damaged. The collapse of the former USSR left the newly independent Armenia with no funds to recover completely from the catastrophe.

Thousands of families were housed in "temporary" metal shelters called *domiks*, which were baking hot in summer and freezing cold in winter.

By issuing housing vouchers and home improvement grants to eligible families still living in *domiks*, the Armenia Earthquake Zone Alliance aimed to stimulate the development of a housing market in Armenia.

USAID Armenia is contributing almost \$31 million to subsidize the housing vouchers and grants and remove the temporary shelters. For every dollar provided through USAID, alliance partners contribute cash or resources worth \$2.75.

The Agency's alliance partners include the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, the U.N. Development Program, the All Armenia Fund, the Norwegian Refugee Council, the Jinishian Memorial Foundation, the Huntsman Foundation, and the Lincy Foundation.

The housing voucher program allows families to buy pre-existing homes on the open market. Housing vouchers have a value based on market prices, which allows recipients to buy an apartment or

house and eventually gain title to the property. Once the beneficiary acquires a house or apartment, he then hands over the temporary shelter. The local government is responsible for removing the temporary shelter and thus vacating the area for public or private use.

The alliance also issues housing improvement grants to complete unfinished houses in rural areas. After the building or house is finished, it is transferred to the beneficiary, who hands over his temporary shelter and acquires title to the new house.

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From 1999 through July 2003, nearly 4,000 housing vouchers were issued. About 2,500 voucher owners have gained title to their new homes. As a result of the grants component, 650 rural families have been successfully housed as of July 2003. In addition, alliance partners have removed 2,204 *domics* and are coordinating community plans for future land use.

"This program has given thousands of families a new and safe cradle as well as a new life," said Mr. Kamo Khachaturian, Head of the Housing Department at the Ministry of Urban Development.

The Armenia Earthquake Zone Alliance will house more than 10,000 families by summer 2004. ★

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Construction workers finish the last details as an Armenian family prepares to move into its newly constructed home in its own village with the help of USAID-sponsored housing program.